Remarks on Diversity in Literacy,
Comprehensiveness of History Instruction, and Book Banning
State Board of Education Meeting
Tuesday, February 8, 2022

Members of the board, members of the community, staff members, good afternoon. As many of you are aware, February is Black History Month. I would be remiss if I did not share a few reflections associated therewith at today's State Board meeting.

The history of Black History Month dates back almost a century. In 1926, noted black historian Carter G. Woodson and the Association for the Study of Negro Life announced the second week of February as Negro History Week. Woodson wrote later that year of Negro History Week: "If a race has no history, it has no worthwhile tradition, it becomes a negligible factor in the thought of the world."

Fifty years later, in 1976, President Gerald Ford declared February Black History Month. Forty-six years thereafter, we continue to honor the contributions of blacks to the history of the United States.

Two skinny weeks ago, MDE hosted our third diversity in literature conference, for which more than 1,100 educators registered. Indeed, we have had more than 1,100 educators register for each of the three diversity in literature conferences that we have mounted in the last year.

We've been fortunate to have, as keynote speakers at our three conferences, Professor/Author Dr. Gholdy Muhammad, Professor/Author Nikki Giovanni, and Professor/Author Shonda Buchanan. Each of our keynote speakers brought a unique perspective to the subject of diversity in literature.

Board, as you may recall, it was Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop, professor emerita at Ohio State University, who noted that it was important for children—ALL CHILDREN--to see themselves in their literature (mirrors), to see others in their literature (windows), and to be able to enter others' worlds through their literature (sliding doors). Such beautiful, evocative language!

The birthday of one of the great authors in U.S. history, Langston Hughes, was last Tuesday, February 1. Hughes wrote poetry, short stories, a novel, two autobiographies, history, essays, newspaper columns, children's stories, an opera, and plays. In a prodigious career that spanned more than four decades, Hughes wrote many poems that would become well known, including "Mother to Son," "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," and "I,Too." In the poem, "Dreams," Hughes wrote:

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird

That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.

And he wrote "Harlem," another short poem that poignantly pops about the same dream theme but with very different analogies:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
and then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
Like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
Like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

In 1962, Hughes wrote Fight for Freedom: The Story of the NAACP, the first history of the NAACP, which had been founded in 1909, not coincidentally in February as well. Here's a copy of Fight for Freedom. Some of you are certainly aware—but others perhaps not—that the NAACP, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, was originally an anti-lynching organization, charged with ending the horrific practice of lynching in the deep South, as well as an anti-segregation and pro-voting rights organization.

It's common to be supportive of the NAACP these days, but was it always so? It was not. Those who worked for it were under siege for decades in the deep south. The NAACP was the subject of lawsuits and other efforts to constrain its membership in Alabama, Louisiana, and South Carolina, among other states. The NAACP's first field secretary in Mississippi, Medgar Evers, who investigated the Emmett Till lynching in 1955 and who helped James Meredith fight to enroll in the University of Mississippi in 1962, was murdered outside his home in June 1963.

The NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, run by Thurgood Marshall for many years, would make a legal assault on Plessy v. Ferguson, the 1896 U.S. Supreme Court decision that found that segregation in public accommodations, including public schools, was legal. Fifty-

eight years later, in 1954, in a series of lawsuits argued by the NAACP, the U.S. Supreme Court would overturn Plessy and rule in Brown v. the Topeka Board of Education that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional.

Now black history is not simply black history; it's more broadly American history as well. And we do well to remember that the history of blacks is inextricably a part of the history of the country, as the histories of ALL OUR PEOPLES in our country are inextricably parts of the history of our country. You can't separate history from history simply because you find it convenient to do so.

The U.S. Constitution is arguably the greatest document in the history of the United States. Imagine the irony, then, when I suggest that this document be taught to our children, and some people react as if the suggestion would *harm* our children.

In a nutshell: our children should learn major aspects of their judicial, statutory, and constitutional history in school. I've already mentioned Plessy v. Ferguson and Brown v. the Topeka Board of Education. But they should also learn about Dred Scott v. Sandford, the 1857 U.S. Supreme Court case that ruled that blacks, whether free or enslaved, could not be American citizens and therefore had no standing to sue in federal court.

It would take amendments to the U.S. Constitution to rectify this great wrong. Many of us were taught about the Emancipation Proclamation but were left to believe that the Emancipation Proclamation abolished slavery forever and everywhere. It did not. It abolished slavery for the remainder of the Civil War, and only in confederate states, not in border states that permitted slavery but did not secede.

It would take the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, ratified in December 1865 after the end of the Civil War, to permanently abolish slavery.

It would take the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, ratified in July 1868, to provide citizenship to all individuals born or naturalized in the United States. Tellingly, the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery was not sufficient to provide U.S. citizenship to blacks. It would take the 14th Amendment to do so.

It would take the 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, ratified in February 1870, to provide ALL men, irrespective of "race, color, or previous condition of servitude," the right to vote as citizens. Tellingly, the 14th Amendment granting citizenship did not include by extension the right to vote. It would take the 15th Amendment to do so.

Black women would gain the right to vote with the passage of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1920, which made it unconstitutional to deny the right to vote on the basis of sex.

Notwithstanding the 13th, 14th, 15th, and 19th amendments to the U.S. Constitution, in many southern states, blacks were still fighting for the right to vote into the 1960s. It would take the

injuries and deaths of civil rights foot soldiers and leaders and the death of a president before Congress ultimately acted, amidst marches and rallies and political lobbying, with the forceful urging of another president. Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964—to ban segregation in public accommodations, among other highlights--and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to effectively protect amendments to the U.S. Constitution—the right of citizenship, the right to vote—that had been ratified almost a century earlier.

This is all part of black history, all part of U.S. history more broadly writ, and all necessary for children to learn—ALL children. Our social studies teachers don't simply have the right to teach about these searing aspects of U.S. history; they have a professional responsibility to do so.

Bills that—if passed by a state legislature—would deliberately undermine the teaching of the full breadth of U.S. history—the teaching of our judicial, statutory, and constitutional history—or, at a minimum, would put a chill in educators who seek to teach the full breadth of U.S. history are bills that engage in their own form of cancel culture.

Our state is a diverse state—in a diverse country. Our young people are diverse, and they deserve to be prepared for a diverse world. As we become more diverse, some have leaned on lessons from the past to aid their cause, including book banning, or some close cousin thereof.

Just a couple of weeks ago, I read about a local school district effort, in another state, to ban Maus. You may know the book: it's a graphic novel about the Holocaust.

I remember the first time I read Maus many years ago. I read it with the middle school children to whom it had been assigned. I was prepared to dislike it. I thought that a graphic novel would trivialize the Holocaust. I was wrong. In fact, the format didn't undermine the teaching of the Holocaust; it somehow brought the theme home for the students.

So imagine my surprise when I found out that Maus had been banned for offensive language and nudity by a school district. I re-read Maus. As a superintendent, I wanted to *see* the offensive language and pictures that had led to the book banning. I wanted to *understand* what was more offensive than the killing of 6 million Jews and millions of others who had likewise been considered inferior races of people to the Nazis. I re-read Maus. I found nothing in language or picture that deserved to be banned.

Maus isn't the only book to be banned of late. Earlier I mentioned black author Langston Hughes, the anniversary of whose birthday was last Tuesday, February 1. Another outstanding black author—may *she* rest in peace—was Toni Morrison, the anniversary of whose birth is next week, on February 18. Before she died, Morrison won a Pulitzer Prize in 1987 for her novel Beloved and a Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993. Her acclaim didn't stop her books from being banned at some point in her career and after her death, including The Bluest Eye, Song of Solomon, and Beloved.

The long-time failure to recognize the value of diversity of literature and comprehensive of history instruction—including the teaching about the history of race and racism in our

classrooms—and the more pernicious explicit effort of some to exclude diverse literature and comprehensive history instruction from our classrooms do a disservice to our children, who need to learn broadly about the literature and history of their country…and others' countries as well. To say that we shouldn't teach about the superiority of one people over another seems legitimate on the one hand, until one reflects that the Holocaust, slavery, Jim Crow and other aspects of our history were all founded on the perceived superiority of some over others. You can't teach these searing, salient parts of history without acknowledging that they were founded on the despicable belief that some were superior to others.

To teach about these and many other aspects of history is not for the purpose of making anyone uncomfortable, but the history will inevitably make many uncomfortable. So, too, though, the ignoring or plowing under of history leaves its own marks, far more enduring, far worse. We do well to teach the full breadth of our history, in social studies and in literature, and to wrestle with the complexity of that history, rather than to limit our children's and our own knowledge as adults of the history and to suffer the adverse impacts of ignorance.

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